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ABSTRACT

The current patchwork of programs designed to ameliorate poverty has failed. Efforts to alleviate poverty by expanding educational opportunities have also had little impact. Poverty among youth has increased during the past two decades even though federal funds for reducing poverty have grown and median educational attainment has increased. Centralized policies and programs have been neither effective nor efficient; perhaps because they are developed on the basis of aggregate data (while needs are diverse), they often ignore the needs and interests of those served, and they may undermine local survival strategies that have been operating for generations. A summary of findings from two rural schools in economically depressed Appalachian counties illustrates the diversity of conditions and needs that can be found in locations that would appear very similar to demographers and policymakers. Evidence from these locations supports policy recommendations to: (1) create a system of coordinated poverty interventions that avoids gaps and duplications; (2) provide funding for local development, design, and pilot testing of programs; (3) develop avenues for dissemination of information about successful interventions; (4) utilize the school as the hub of all activities pertaining to program development for economically disadvantaged youth; and (5) provide funding for articulation of efforts between schools and service agencies. (SV)

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SAVE THE COMMUNITY OR SAVE THE STUDENTS: POLICY IMPLICATIONS FROM STUDIES OF RURAL SCHOOL SUCCESS

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A. INTRODUCTION

What has been the wellspring of educational policy impacting economically disadvantaged students? For decades policy makers have built interventions on aggregated data detailing the impact of poverty and its adjuncts on the lives of young people. The time has come for policy makers to examine the efficacy of this approach to decision making.

Myrdal (1944) is credited with popularizing the concept of the cycle of poverty in which he identified a set of causal factors said to conjoin to foster poverty among poor blacks. Poor education was identified as causing limited employment opportunities, thereby creating a low standard of living. The low living standard of poor blacks was said to lead to deficient medical care, inadequate diet, and substandard housing into which subsequent generations were born. The cycle could be entered at any point among the factors, and the impact would be the same.

In the early 1960's the Kennedy administration seized upon the idea of the cycle of poverty and built its case for the War on Poverty on Michael Harrington's The Other America: Poverty in the United States (Spring, 1986). Harrington's work contained massive statistics pertaining to poverty and unemployment and provided the foundation for the Council of Economic Advisers report presented to Congress in the form of recommendations for the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (EOA). Once again, however, the statistics that provided the underpinning for the EOA were aggregated data developed at the federal or state levels.

It is important to note that Spring (1986) also points out that Harrington argued that

the culture of poverty was rapidly beginning to perpetuate itself due to the expansion of technology in the larger culture. The rise of technology, even in the early 1960's, led to increasing educational demands for occupational success, and these demands created an ever expanding gulf between those who were adequately educated and those who were not. Thus, the poor in the society were further frustrated economically.

In more recent times policies and programs have included such attempts to allay the impact of poor educational opportunity as Chapter 1 reading and mathematics programs; Head Start; Even Start; Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); the federal school lunch and breakfast program; various health care initiatives; and a myriad of state programs. Yet, even with such emphases as these, the proportion of children living in poverty in the United States has risen.

In 1970 there were 10.2 million children living below the poverty level; in 1990 there were 12.7 million. More shocking than the raw numbers, however, are the comparative proportions of children living in poverty. In 1970 it was 14.9%, yet by 1990, the proportion had risen to 19.9%. Schooling has obviously has not had the desired impact in alleviating poverty among children. In 1970 the median years of attained schooling was 12.1 years; in 1990 it was 12.7 years. The proportion of Americans with 4 years of high school in 1970 was 31.1%; in 1990 it was 38.6%. Finally, the proportion of Americans with 4 years or more of college rose dramatically during the same period from 10.7% in 1970 to 21.4% in 1990 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1992). The net

effect of schooling, then, has not been to narrow the gap between the proportion of children living in poverty and those living above the poverty level.

Perhaps, then, Clune (1993) posits the correct question when he asks whether the best path to educational success in policy making is through standard/centralized policies or via differentiated/decentralized policies that allow for discrete differences among differing sites, locales, and peoples. Clune states: "The basic means-ends analysis of systemic educational policy may simply be mistaken in light of current social, political, and educational conditions in the United States" (p. 233). He also identifies four basic problems with centralized policies: (1) standardization--diverse needs; (2) lack of attention to delivery; (3) problems with assessing policy success or failure; and (4) incompatibility of policies with governance structures.

Often centralized policies and programs ignore the needs and interests of those being served by focusing on economic deprivation while limiting focus on other factors and by implementation that undermines survival strategies that have been operating perhaps for several generations (Washington, 1985). Currently the available data upon which programs are built focus on net family income, wealth, health, household composition, and employment characteristics (Olsen, 1991).

Centralized policies and programs have been neither effective nor efficient. In 1985 the funding level for 59 means programs was $132 billion, reducing the poverty rate from 12.8% to 7.4%; yet if the impact of means-tested benefits were taken out of the

equation, the poverty rate could have been reduced to zero with an investment of $51.6 billion (Germanis & Bavier, 1986). In short, nearly 13 million young people still live in poverty (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1992).

As a result of results like those above, the Domestic Policy Council (1986) issued five recommendations for creating a better system to deal with the incidence of poverty in the United States:

- Create a system that is treated as a system
- All programs should be locally tested before national implementation
- Federal financing should be provided with maximum local flexibility
- Federal funds should be devoted to local demonstration projects
- Federal support should be provided for local experimental programs

Even with these recommendations before them as early as 1986, policy makers have continued to develop policies and programs via the centralized model. What impact will new programs have for success? Probably about the same as those propagated under the same centralized model have achieved in the past.

B. SAVE THE COMMUNITY OR SAVE THE STUDENTS?

During the study of two schools in the adjoining states of Kentucky and Tennessee, the authors noted differing attitudes, approaches, and impacts of schooling on economically disadvantaged middle grades students. When the data were compared, these differing phenomena operating at the two sites appeared to serve distinct purposes.

At one site (Goldenrod, Kentucky [a pseudonym]) the phenomena seemed to operate to prepare students for life in a world much broader than the isolated community in which they lived. At the second site (Iris, Tennessee [also a pseudonym]) the phenomena observed appeared to operate to give students a proscribed education that would ensure that they would stay within the community, thus perpetuating the life of the community. It was at this point that the researchers began to question the validity of programs and intervention strategies developed from a centralized perspective.

In one instance, schooling was seen as a vehicle for students to improve themselves, and the choices made could well lead to the eventual demise of the community itself, particularly if the most talented among the younger generations were to leave never to return. In the other instance, schooling was seen as necessary to ensure that students could function within the customs and economy of the community, yet not leave. Thus, the community would be preserved.

For a full discussion of the findings from this study see "Linking Inputs and Outcomes: Achievement Among Economically Disadvantaged Appalachian Middle Grades Students" (Henry, Hare, Phelps, Raftery, & Franklin, 1992) and "Inputs, Processes, and Outcomes: The Context for Achievement Among Economically Disadvantaged Students in Appalachia" (Henry, Hare, Phelps, Raftery, and Franklin, 1993).

C. SYNOPSIS OF FINDINGS

Similarities

Iris County (Tennessee) and Goldenrod Schools (Kentucky) are alike in a number of very important ways. Both are in the Appalachian mountains and are thoroughly Appalachian in customs and ways of life. Both are located among the persistent poverty counties identified by the Appalachian Regional Commission. Government payments (e.g., unemployment, welfare, retirement, social security, etc.) comprise a large proportion of the local economy.

Historically, education has neither been highly valued nor easily accessible in either area. This is evidenced by school buildings that are old and in constant need of repair. Course offerings are limited; more advanced offerings are often taught by unqualified personnel if they are taught at all.

Both schools are centrally located among small, outlying communities quite a distance from the schools. The central schools have absorbed smaller schools through the years. Many areas have made an effort to maintain a sense of community through centers located in the old school structures, volunteer fire departments, Head Start programs, etc.

The economy in both locations has taken a severe downturn. The Iris economy turns on farming, usually tobacco and grain, and small cut-and-sew factory operations. Goldenrod has, and continues to be, highly dependent on the coal industry. Both locales

have logging and pulpwood operations, but these segments of the economy are seasonal and also highly dependent on the broader economy of the area.

The cost of living in each area is quite low. Neither area has much crime, particularly violent crime. Most citizens are local to the area, and they have assumed ownership of homes and local family property. Property in both locations may have been sold during the years, but it was seldom **offered** for sale. Rather, property usually was purchased by family or community members for **value**, and not at auction or by the typical real estate listing process.

To demographers and policy makers these two areas would appear to be nearly the same, yet they differ markedly in a number of very important ways.

Unique Characteristics of Iris

Iris County was a center of river traffic during the historical period when barge traffic was a primary means of transport of manufactured good and agricultural products. Agriculture was also a key element in the Iris County economy in past years, but a federally funded project purchased much of the low lying farm land, and it was flooded to form one of the many lakes in Tennessee. Owners of these large parcels of land frequently left Iris County, and with them many of the brightest students in the Iris County schools also left. Valuable property was removed from the tax roles, and much of the satellite business surrounding the farming enterprise (e.g., farm supplies and equipment) was lost.

The shrinking economy and tax base led to an out migration during which homes and remaining farms were sold. Many retirees and other "outsiders" have purchased land and moved to Iris County; however, they are well received if they try to fit into the community and its activities.

Iris County has also become the home to other new residents. Displaced residents from the federal project and low income families from other areas have migrated to low rent housing units newly constructed in Iris County. Many long time residents of Iris County see these new residents as the primary cause of many of the problems within the Iris County schools. Additionally, the economic base of Iris County cannot support its local population, and the influx of new residents has further burdened local services to students who come from homes with undereducated and unemployed parents.

Unique Characteristics of Goldenrod

The Goldenrod economy has historically been nearly totally dependent on the coal industry. In former times the employment rate among Goldenrod males was high, but today few mining jobs are available and unemployment is high. The current Goldenrod economy is highly dependent on older residents who exist on retirement (social security or miner's pensions) or disability (black lung) incomes. Many younger residents are either unemployed or exist with the aid of retired/disabled family members.

There are a few low wage jobs available locally in the grocery store, dry goods store, etc., but these are often held by the family members of the business owners. The

school system is currently the primary employer in the community, and the competition for teaching positions is intense.

Property in Goldenrod has long been held by absentee corporations involved in the mining business. When the mining companies sold their camps, those miners who could afford it purchased their homes. These homes have typically stayed within the family and have seldom gone on the market. Few people have moved to Goldenrod. Those few who have are usually children or former residents returning to the community.

D. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

What, then, are the policy implications from this research? The Domestic Policy Council's (1986) five recommendations for the creation of a system to battle the incidence of poverty provide a solid framework for analysis.

Create a System That Is a System

The key ingredient for reducing the incidence of poverty among children in the United States is the creation of a system that is a network of coordinated interventions for the service of children and families living in poverty. The current patchwork of programs includes a great deal of overlap among services, and the gaps in service to children and families living in poverty are all too great. Goldenrod school personnel make sure that their students receive the social services they needed, but at the time of this study Iris students fell victim to noticeable gaps in social services.

The segment of the population living in poverty needs programs that deal with the major roadblocks to improving their standard of living. Chief among these are educational (not limited to schooling), family living, health and hygiene, economic management, and nutritional interventions.

All Programs Should be Locally Tested Before National Implementation

Every program for which governmental dollars are allocated should be tested locally. Because each region of the country has its own operational culture, some programs developed on the basis of aggregated data may not work well in any region. Because of such regional, and indeed local differences (note the differences between the two communities in the current study), a successful program to intervene with urban poor youth may fail among Appalachian poor youth because of cultural resistance.

Both Goldenrod and Iris field a full compliment of athletic teams, yet the differences between the purposes identified by the faculty of the two schools are great due to differing community expectations for schooling for their young people. In Goldenrod two primary purposes emerged (i.e., providing a basis for improved faculty and student morale and developing a broader world perspective for students). In Iris athletic competition was not valued for either purpose. It was simply a part of the school program.

Federal Financing Should Be Provided With Maximum Local Flexibility

Because of differing regional and local customs and expectations for schooling and other social services, federal dollars would be much more wisely spent if programs were flexible to the extent that they could be shaped to local needs. In some cases federal dollars seem to drain away the most talented young people from the community; in others they may even serve directly to damage the local economy.

Although Goldenrod school personnel are doing everything they can to ensure that their students have the opportunity to succeed in the world (e.g., more than $50,000 in college scholarships were awarded at the most recent graduation), little federal or state funding has been earmarked to help the Goldenrod community to overcome the debilitating impact of the slow death of the coal industry; thus, the most talented and brightest students in the Goldenrod schools usually leave never to return because of a lack of opportunity. The impact in Iris of federal dollars (the building of a lake with federal funds) was to cripple perhaps the most vital aspect (farming and its adjunct businesses) of the local economy.

Federal Funds Should Be Devoted to Local Demonstration Projects

Local demonstration projects provide opportunities to develop interventions that can be tested and refined before vast sums are spent on national or regional initiatives. Moreover, these projects can provide the basis for convincing leaders in other locales that programs can succeed in their settings.

The K-8 program at Iris has been greatly impacted via a project (LEarning Visions) to intervene with students at risk for failure. This project utilizes direct home contacts, linkages with social service agencies, and computer technology to help students improve their learning skills. Students at the secondary level, however, were not being served to the degree that students at the K-8 level were.

As a result, the research team arranged for a visit to the Goldenrod site by faculty and staff from the Iris schools. Faculty in Iris seemed defeated in their efforts to battle the impact of poverty on their students, yet the researchers believed that their schools and location provided them with certain advantages over Goldenrod. Goldenrod school personnel, however, were engaged in a restructuring project that had led them to notable success. School attendance had risen from below 90% to near 98% during the project. Dropout rates had fallen significantly. But perhaps most importantly, the school seemed charged with an energy too often lacking among schools elsewhere.

The research team arranged for a core of faculty from Iris to visit the Goldenrod campus, and the results were encouraging beyond the most optimistic hopes of the researchers. Immediately after the visit, the faculty from Iris began discussing ways that they could implement several of the components of the Goldenrod restructuring program. In fact, within a week some of the reforms had already been implemented in Iris, and other aspects of the program were in the formal planning stage. A second visit to the Goldenrod campus by other Iris school personnel and the district superintendent netted

similar results.

Subsequently, a visit to the Iris campus was arranged for the principal and several faculty from Goldenrod. While there, they gained a new perspective on their own restructuring while also developing ideas for continued growth (e.g., development of an interactive television hookup with regional higher education institutions for advanced study in specialized disciplines).

Federal Support Should Be Provided for Local Experimental Programs

The restructuring at Goldenrod could not have been accomplished without the aid of outside funding; neither could the interactive television hookup with a nearby university at Iris. The Goldenrod school received funding and support from a private organization in the state for its restructuring program. The Iris schools received funding from a grant written and administered by a regional economic development agency in cooperation with a regional university.

Federal funds could serve to fuel reform and restructuring for local schools by allowing them to develop experimental programs such as those mentioned above. These reforms could well lead to improved outcomes for economically disadvantaged students. Furthermore, federal funds could also be allocated for experimental programs and projects to more closely coordinate activities among various agencies serving economically disadvantaged populations. These projects could, in turn, serve as models for leaders in other locations throughout the region and the country.

E. CONCLUSIONS

The current patchwork of programs designed to improve the economic standing of young people living below the poverty level has failed. Although each program was designed with the best intentions and was based on the best available data, they each have flaws that serve to make them at best marginal in achieving their intentions. In addition, there are massive overlaps and far too many gaps in the services provided through programs for youth and families living in poverty.

The current system is not a system. It is in fact uncoordinated and only a loosely coupled set of programs and interventions. Local testing of programs prior to national implementation is not the norm. Most federally funded programs lack flexibility, and few federal dollars are available for local demonstration or experimental programs.

The net result is an increase in the proportion of young people living below the poverty level. Even though federal funds for reducing poverty have grown through the past two decades and the median years of attained schooling (and the proportions of high school and college educated adults) have increased, poverty has also increased among youth.

The time has come for federal and state funding agencies to leave the centralized/comprehensive planning design of the past and for them to move to a planning design that develops a comprehensive system based on local testing and initiative. It is time for policy makers to develop trust for local leaders and also to develop

a cooperative relationship with them to better serve economically disadvantaged 5-populations.

F. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above considerations, the authors make the following recommendations:

- Ensure that all services provided for economically disadvantaged populations are coordinated to eliminate duplication and gaps in services
- Provide funding to allow for local development of data, design of programs, and pilot testing of programs
- Develop avenues for dissemination of information pertaining to successful interventions
- Utilize the school as the hub of all activity pertaining to program development for economically disadvantaged youth because it is the only service agency that serves all of this population
- Provide funding for articulation of efforts between schools and service agencies in the broader community

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